

# “...The Tough Get Going”

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“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity; that has been my mantra for years—that’s what I live by,” says the 28-year-old, California-sportbike-racer Dawn Champion.

Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Dawn purchased her first motorcycle, a Kawasaki Ninja EX-250, five years ago, after suffering through a three-hour, 45-mile commute to work by car. “I taught myself how to ride that night,” she said. “It didn’t take long for me to realize, though, that surviving on the streets as a motorcyclist would require the right gear [*certainly more than the Rollerblade helmet, elbow pads, and knee pads she started with*], the right motorcycle, the right skills, and the right attitude. I got myself onto the track and began developing my motorcycling skills and philosophy.”

A week later, while nursing a number of bruises, Dawn had obtained a motorcycle license, and within two weeks, she had traded the Ninja for a more powerful Kawasaki ZX-6R. Her average time for the 45-mile commute fell to one hour—on bad days—but she had to face a fear factor. “I was terrified,” she admitted.

The more Dawn rode, though, the more she overcame her fear. Simultaneously, she also realized, however, how much she still needed to learn. She subsequently honed her skills [*on the twisting canyon roads in San Diego County and a track in Rosamond, north of Los Angeles*] to the point where racing became the next logical step. She finished her first race in third

On the track,  
Dawn Champion  
is all business.



place [*among 50 riders*], and with several subsequent third- through ninth-place finishes, she soon had a reputation, as well as the respect she was looking for. “I’m a firm believer that riding with smoothness and skill, accurately interpreting feedback from your bike, and adopting the right attitude are far superior to just riding as fast as you can go,” she explained.

Her refined yet aggressive style and unique look already have garnered many interesting opportunities in her fledgling riding career. As she noted, though, “I eagerly anticipate what is yet to come.” I should explain here that Dawn prepares for the worst, while expecting the best, and that preparation starts with her choice of safety gear.

For openers, she wears a Z-Custom Leathers full-leather suit, with a built-in back protector that’s double the thickness of regular back protectors. “It’s

A frame from Dawn's video shows the Honda Civic spinning out of control and nearing the point where it T-boned the left side of her bike.

not as heavy duty as my full racing suit with back protector, but it's a lot better than any regular one you buy," she assured. Her other riding gear consists of Sidi Race Vertebra boots, full gauntlet Teknic gloves, and Shoei top-of-the-line full-face helmet.

Dawn also wears one more important piece of gear—a piece that eliminates any possibility of a “he said, she said” situation from happening while she's out riding. She wears a helmet-cam on her helmet, connected to a Sony HC42 camcorder that resides in a fanny pack around her waist. The lightweight helmet-cam is the “eye,” and the camcorder records the footage on a MiniDV tape. Dawn decided to purchase the electronic equipment after a lot of research.

This gear paid for itself one Friday afternoon in early 2006, when Dawn was on her way home from work [on her *Yamaha YZF-R1*]. She was in the freeway's No. 1 (fast) lane, with a Honda Civic in an HOV lane, when the Honda's driver suddenly slammed on the brakes, locking up the wheels and losing control. The Honda swerved across the No. 1 lane and turned nearly 180 degrees before crossing into the No. 2 lane, where Dawn had moved to avoid collision. The car's right front panel T-boned the left side of her motorcycle, sending her rolling on the asphalt. [The Honda's driver told police that Dawn's motorcycle hit him, but her cam video, which became an instant hit on the Internet, proved otherwise.] Did I mention that right behind her at the time was, as she put it, “one of those monster Hummer things,” with a pack of other cars around it?

Within a couple days of her up-close-and-personal encounter with the asphalt, Dawn was back riding, which undoubtedly made some people chalk



up her close call to “just luck,” and that bothers her. Why? Because, according to her, “A lot of thought and preparation went into that moment and spelled the difference between life and death.” The same can't be said for another motorcyclist, who, as Dawn noted, crashed a week later on a nearby freeway. All the circumstances mirrored her situation, yet the rider didn't survive his crash. While no one ever will know for sure what made the difference, Dawn has her theories, “and it's those theories that have kept me around this long,” she said.

“I'm not lucky at all—if I were, I'd have won the lottery years ago, and nothing bad ever would have happened to me. It's just that, instead of whining about how unfair or hard life is, I learn from my mistakes and toughen up so I can take on the next challenge with my head held high. Nothing in life comes free. If you want it, you have to be willing to look for it, find it, learn it, and live it. Make your choices wisely. The only ‘luck’ you can count on is that which you create.”

Although Dawn's street incident left a lasting impression, it pales in comparison to a couple crashes she has had on the track. The first one came Oct. 5, 2004, after three years of riding [including two years





A third-place finish in her first real race July 18, 2004, as a novice middleweight, earned Dawn the trophy she's proudly displaying here.

remember touching the front brake and wondering why the ride suddenly had gotten so bumpy. Then

*of riding on the track*] and 120,000 miles on bikes. She had a premonition she was about to take a spill. Two months earlier, she had told a friend, "I'm going to crash on the track..., and it's going to be a bad one."

She had had a bad feeling all day Oct. 5, but by day's end, nothing bad had happened, so she agreed to go out and play with some of the boys on the track. "There were three or four of us that headed out in the fast group," she said. "I was in the lead, picking up the pace as we went along. We soon were the group that was lapping everyone else on the track—we became the focus of the moment."

Dawn came up behind an old friend whom she knew she could pass, but she couldn't get a clean outside pass *[no inside passing was allowed this track day]*, so she decided to stay behind him for a few more laps. Starting into the fourth lap, she still was behind him and, becoming impatient, decided not to brake for turn No. 1. "I'll be past him before turn No. 2," she thought. She was next to him on the outside when she saw he was going wider than expected. "This pass will be closer than I thought," she realized. In full lean, she touched the front brake *[rear brake wasn't working]*, and the real "fun" began.

"All those eyes that had been on our group for all these laps," said Dawn, "saw my bike and me lowside, hit the dirt at 120 mph *[at an angle]*, and get pitched up in the air, cartwheeling out into the desert. I

I heard a whooosh, which was followed by silence. It was while thinking, 'Hey, that wasn't half bad!' that I opened my eyes to find myself high in the air, beginning a long and fast descent. Thoughts of 'Whoa, I'm flying!' quickly turned to 'Ah crap, this is gonna hurt!'

"I remember sliding across the desert, watching the rocks fly by two inches from my face, with only the plastic of my faceshield protecting me. When the faceshield finally ripped off, I closed my eyes so the debris only would hit my face. I eventually was able to roll onto my back, but I still was flying so fast the effort sent me tumbling. I curled into a tight ball and tried to relax all my muscles and just go with the flow.

"Once I came to a halt, I opened my eyes, made sure I really had stopped, did a quick inventory of body parts, and raised my head to see if I was in the impact zone. I was so far out in the desert *[about 80 feet]* I couldn't even see the track. At that moment, I remembered the familiar phrase, 'If I can't see it, then it can't see me...' I then looked for my bike and saw it a few feet away—I could tell it was totaled *[the only thing on the bike that wasn't bent or beat up was maybe the engine]*. Feeling a sense of great loss overcome me, I laid my head down again and waited for reinforcements. The ambulance and staff were at my side in moments."

Despite the broken ribs, fingers and wrist; concussion; bumps; and bruises she suffered, Dawn was back

## Here are remnants of Dawn's bike after her first track crash Oct. 5, 2004.

racing 11 days later—this time, though, as an expert, not a novice. She would be racing against some people who had been racing longer than she had been alive. The competition in this race was on a whole different level. By turn No. 6 of the first lap, she wanted to quit the race but finally conquered her fears and convinced herself to stay.

Dawn was drafting another rider as they approached turn No. 9, with plans to pass him on the exit of the turn. She quickly shifted gears and gunned the throttle, only to realize she was closing in on him too fast. "I swerved to the left and tried to squeeze past him next to the dirt," said Dawn, "but he stuck out his left leg and moved left. Time froze for a moment as I thought, 'I'm not going to make it—there's nowhere else for me to go.' I suddenly fully realized exactly how fast 130-plus mph really is. The three or four feet separating us disappeared quickly and, as impact occurred, I wondered, for the first time, if I would be OK."

What Dawn hadn't realized in time was that the racer in front of her was braking [*e.g., race bikes have no brake lights*] and moving left to stop because he



had seen a red flag up by the finish line. The red flag meant that someone needed an ambulance, and under the race rules, everyone had to stop on the track to allow the ambulance to roll out. Because of controversy already surrounding the red-flag rule, Dawn's crash caused it to be changed. The new rule requires everyone to "reduce speed and safely come in off the track."

Paramedics found Dawn lying next to the green pit wall. They weren't sure if she had hit it and bounced off, or if she had landed there. Once at the hospital, she learned she had many broken bones [*15 at last count, some of which weren't found until 3.5 weeks after the crash, among them a broken jaw and skull fracture*], torn ligaments and tendons, deep cuts, contusions, bumps, and bruises. Many said she should have been dead.

Doctors wanted to schedule four different surgeries, but Dawn turned them all away. They instead put her leg in a cast [*for six to eight weeks*], which she promptly cut off a half-hour later when she got home. At two weeks, she was taking her first steps; at three weeks, she discarded the crutches and was able



Here's what Dawn's bike looked like after her Oct. 16, 2004 crash.



## Dawn enjoys a lighthearted moment in the 2002 Pontiac Trans Am she once owned.

to walk with a limp; at four weeks, she was riding and trying to recover the atrophied muscles; and, at five weeks, she completed a 200-mile canyon run, trying to get herself back in shape.

Dawn refers to this crash as “a good thing. A lot of growing came out of recovering from it,” she said, “a lot of realizations, new decisions, new thoughts, new ideas, new understandings, new resolutions—not just about riding but my entire life.”

When asked to name one skill she feels is important for all riders to have, Dawn quickly responded, “Knowing how to fall.” As she explained, the first thing martial-arts instructors teach is how to fall, not how to throw a punch. Why? Because they know everyone makes mistakes, and knowing how to minimize the damage of those mistakes improves your chances to keep learning. “When you make mistakes, learn from them, and then get up and move on, knowing you’ll make more in the future,” she said.

Dawn was surprised when an old-timer from Australia e-mailed her, saying how surprised he was a “youngster” like her knew about the importance of knowing how to fall. It turns out this old-timer, back in the day, was a stunt rider. He said schools existed back then to teach riders how to fall—off the back of slow-moving trucks and in full gear. “Obviously, with today’s liability issues,” noted Dawn, “lessons like that probably aren’t available anymore. But, it does show I’m not the first to see the truth in those skills, and I feel they are worth reviving again in the minds of today’s riders.”

Riding and racing motorcycles aren’t Dawn’s only interests. She also loves horses and horseback riding. “I enjoy the perfect balance of solitude and partnership found in such activities,” she said. She also likes cats—she currently has two calicos that were rescued when they were just kittens.

Another interest is cars, dating back to the collection of Hot Wheels she had as a 5-year-old. Her favorite Hot Wheels were a Pontiac Firebird and a 1976 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray. The list of vehicles she has owned starts with a 1974 Ford Pinto (a bright orange one), a burgundy 2001 Toyota Corolla, a silver 2001 Toyota 4-Runner, a 2002 Pontiac Grand Prix, a firecracker-red 2002 Pontiac Trans Am (with the WS6



package, brand spanking new from the dealership), and currently, a 2003 Toyota Tacoma double-cab pickup.

And, Dawn loves music—lots and lots of music. She can play piano well enough to convince people she can play, unless, as she qualifies it, “they stick around longer than three minutes.” She also can play guitar well enough to be, in her words, “amusing around the campfire after a day of dirt biking.” One day, she wants to find time to take lessons so she can play more.

Last but certainly not least is Dawn’s boyfriend, Andy. The two of them own a house together in Norco, Calif., one with room to build a dream garage, so they can service and repair their own motorcycles.

Dawn’s dedication, attitude and skill set on the race track have gained the respect of her peers, both male and female. Her desire, however, is to be an example for other young girls and women to follow. I want to show them what is possible when you put your heart, mind and soul into pursuing dreams,” she said. ■

For more info, go to Dawn’s website: [www.SmoothCurvesRacing.com](http://www.SmoothCurvesRacing.com).